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THE SITUATION IN LAOS

Submitted by the
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate: The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and The Joint Staff.

Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD
on 18 September 1959. Concurring were the Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Intelligence, Department of the Navy, the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF, the Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff, the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, Special Operations, and the Director of the National Security Agency. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the USIB, and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

SECRET

No. 329

THE SITUATION IN LAOS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate Communist capabilities and short-run intentions in Laos, and to estimate the reactions of Communist and non-Communist countries to certain contingent developments.

CONCLUSIONS

1. We believe that the Communist resumption of guerrilla warfare in Laos was primarily a reaction to a stronger anti-Communist posture by the Laotian Government and to recent US initiatives in support of Laos. We consider that it was undertaken mainly to protect the Communist apparatus in Laos and to improve Communist prospects for gaining control of the country. (*Paras. 7–8*)

2. The Communists probably believed: (a) that guerrilla warfare offered some prospects—at low risk—of promoting Communist objectives in Laos even if the Laotian Government received substantial moral and material support from the outside, and (b) that military forces which the West would be likely to commit inside Laos would be indecisive against the flexible Communist guerrilla tactics. (*Para. 18*)

3. We estimate that the Communists intend to keep the risks and the costs of their action on a low level and they are not likely in the near future to resort to large-scale guerrilla activity, at least so long as the UN fact-finding mission is in Laos. (*Para. 19*)

4. Most uncommitted and anti-Communist countries would probably support Western intervention in Laos if they were convinced that the Laotian Government's position was grave and that there was direct Communist Bloc support of the Laotian rebels. In that event, they would prefer that such action be taken under UN auspices. (*Paras. 24–26*)

5. Hanoi and Peiping have warned that any foreign military intervention in Laos would be considered as a direct threat to their national security. However, depending partly on the scale and nature of the military move, the Communist military reaction to the Western intervention, whether under UN, SEATO, or US auspices, initially would probably take the form of further covert North Vietnamese intervention rather than overt invasion. There probably would be less effort than at present to camouflage this intervention. This Communist action might, in the first instance, be limited to seizing substantial territory in Laos—such as Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces—which we believe they could do under existing conditions with an aug-

mentation of present guerrilla forces, and then using this situation for political bargaining purposes. The Communists would probably be prepared to accept a prolonged and unresolved struggle, particularly if the country were geographically divided. If non-Asian forces were committed in Laos, the likelihood of an overt Communist invasion would increase.[1] (*Para. 21*)

6. If the Communists should come to believe that a Western intervention appeared capable of resolving the conflict and establishing firm anti-Communist control over Laos, they would then face the difficult decision of whether to raise the ante further, possibly to the point of openly committing North Vietnamese or Chinese Communist forces to the fighting. We estimate that both Communist China and the USSR wish to avoid serious risk of expanding the hostilities more broadly into the Far East or beyond. We believe, therefore, that the Communists would seek through various uses of diplomacy, propaganda, covert action and guerrilla warfare to cause the West to back down. If, however, the Communists became convinced during the course of a series of actions and counteractions that the US intended to commit major US combat forces into Laos, we believe that the odds would be better than even that the Communists would directly intervene in strength with North Vietnamese and possibly Chinese Communist military forces.[2] [3] (*Para. 22*)

[1] The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army; the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Intelligence, Department of the Navy; and the Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff, would delete this sentence, believing that it oversimplifies the factors which might lead to an overt Communist invasion.

[2] The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF believes that the likelihood of overt intervention by Chinese Communist or North Vietnamese forces would be significantly reduced if the Communists were convinced that the US would not limit its counteroperations in an expanding conflict to the territory of Laos.

[3] The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army; and the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Intelligence, Department of the Navy, believe that the last sentence of this paragraph overstates somewhat the willingness of North Vietnam and Communist China to use major military force against the US in the Laos situation, and therefore would delete the sentence and substitute the following: "If these measures failed, North Vietnam, and possibly Communist China, might resort to at least a show of military force in a last effort to make these pressures on the West effective, and the risks of overt Communist military intervention would thus increase. In the end, however, the Communists would be unlikely to press such use of force to a point which in their estimation would approach serious risk of large-scale hostilities." The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, would add the following clause: "particularly if they were convinced that the US would not limit its counteroperations in an expanding conflict to the territory of Laos."

DISCUSSION

I. COMMUNIST INTENTIONS IN LAOS

7. We believe that the initiation of Communist guerrilla warfare in Laos in mid-July was primarily a reaction to a series of actions by the Royal Lao Government which threatened drastically to weaken the Communist position in Laos. For a period of about one year after the November 1957 political agreements between the Laotian Government and the Pathet Lao, the Communist controlled party in Laos—the Neo Lao Hak Zat—attempted to move by legal political competition toward its objective of gaining control of Laos. The Laotian Government had taken counteraction which checked this effort. Moreover, the US had stepped up its activities to strengthen the Laotian Government, notably through the decision to send military training teams, and clearly was increasing its presence in Laos. The Communist advance in Laos was losing impetus. To the Communist world, the future probably appeared to be one of increasing political repression, declining assets, and a strengthened anti-Communist position in the country.

8. Hence we believe that the current crisis was initiated mainly in order to protect the Communist apparatus in Laos, to stop the trend towards Laotian alignment with the US, and to improve Communist prospects for gaining control of the country. Judging by Communist propaganda and diplomatic representations, and by the scale of guerrilla activities to date, it does not appear that the Communists expected by military action to overthrow the Laotian Government and seize control of the country. They may have believed that the government would be intimidated into immediate concessions, restoring at least a major part of the legal and political position which the Communists had enjoyed after the 1957 agreements between the Pathet Lao and the government. We think it more likely, however, that the Communists expected a renewal of strife in Laos to alarm the world at large and to produce a widespread demand for restoration of quiet, and that they hoped thus to bring about through international action a return of the International Control Commission (ICC) to Laos. Under the ICC the Communists had enjoyed substantial advantages, and they probably expected to enjoy them again if the Commission returned.

9. Whatever their initial aims, the Communists undoubtedly were prepared to adapt their tactics and their objectives to the developing situation, and even to press on towards an overthrow of the government and control of the country if the prospects for such actions developed favorably. They may also have in mind, as a feasible intermediate aim, the re-establishment of Communist control over the provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly, and possibly the formation of a rival government in those areas as a springboard for future subversive efforts.

10. The Chinese Communists probably have certain interests in the present crisis in addition to those of North Vietnam. It is basic to Chinese Communist policy to oppose vigorously the strengthening of anti-Communist regimes in the area of their interest in Asia and to resist the strengthening of the US position anywhere on China's periphery. The Chinese Communists probably also wish to demonstrate to Southeast Asian governments, particularly the neutralist ones, that they cannot turn toward the West without serious risks. Although Peiping may well wish to emphasize its importance on the world scene and may regard the Laos crisis as useful for this purpose, this is probably no more than a bonus effect.

11. Soviet interests in the current crisis in Laos are more remote than those of Peiping and Hanoi. The USSR probably views the current actions of Hanoi and of the Communist guerrillas in Laos as a reasonable application of basic Communist revolutionary doctrine and in line with worldwide Communist interests. It is probably willing to let Peiping and Hanoi work out the details so long as the situation does not appear to risk major hostilities with the West. Moscow's propa-

ganda has concentrated on charging the Laotian Government with violations of the 1954 Geneva Agreements, but on the whole, Moscow has continued to follow a more restrained line than Hanoi or Peiping. Soviet restraint on this question is likely to continue at least as long as the current high-level East-West discussions are underway.

II. PROSPECTS FOR GUERRILLA WARFARE

12. Many conditions in Laos, especially in the northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua, are favorable for Communist guerrilla warfare. The country is mostly jungle covered mountains. It is sparsely populated. Most of the people live in small isolated villages connected only by foot trails and waterways. The few roads which do exist, except those in the immediate vicinity of the major towns, are little more than jeep trails. Furthermore, the supply routes from Hanoi into Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces and into central Laos are considerably better than those from Vientiane. Air facilities in Laos are limited. The two primary airfields (Seno and Vientiane) have a year-round capability to support medium transports with limited loads. Three secondary airfields (Luang Prabang, Pakse and Xieng Khouang) can support light transport operations on a year-round basis. The remaining airfields are of marginal value, particularly during the rainy season. Communications facilities are inadequate even for minimum administrative requirements in peacetime. Vientiane has radio communication with the provincial capitals and the regional military commands. Most villages, army outposts, and self-defense units must depend upon runners for communication with higher authorities.

13. Current monsoon rains hamper Laotian Government military operations and logistic support more than they do Communist guerrilla operations. The rainy season generally slackens about mid-September to mid-October and is followed by a five-month dry season.

14. The social and political situation also offers favorable opportunities for Communist guerrilla and psychological warfare. The authority of the Laotian Government has never been thoroughly established throughout the nation, due in part to the physical characteristics of the country and in part to a general lack of interest by the ethnic Lao governing elite, which is concentrated in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. People of Lao stock make up only half of the population. These considerations have inhibited the development of a Laotian national spirit, or identification with the central government. The common people of Laos, especially those in the villages, are superstitious and simple folk highly susceptible to rumors, propaganda and intimidation. Communist psychological warfare has been at least as effective as armed action in the current effort.

15. Government authority has been especially weak in the northern provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly which were under Pathet Lao control until late 1957. During the lull between the 1957 Laotian Government-Pathet Lao agreements on unification and the renewal of Communist guerrilla activity in mid-July of this year, the government had made only a beginning in the process of re-educating the population of these two provinces away from Communist influences, or away from their traditional trade ties with northern Vietnam. This is particularly true among the Kha, Meo and Black Thai tribal groups, whose mountainous domain straddles the Laotian-North Vietnamese border. These tribes, which make up about 50 percent of the population of Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces, have traditionally been antagonistic toward the Lao people and government.

16. Most of the guerrillas in the northern provinces are ex-Pathet Lao soldiers, and Meo and Black Thai tribal people. Elements of the Pathet Lao battalion which refused integration and escaped to North Vietnam are probably involved. It is almost certain that many of the guerrillas now engaged have received training in North Vietnam, that some supplies and equipment for the current operations have been provided by North Vietnam, and that the guerrillas move into and out of North Vietnam as necessary. The total number of guerrillas involved up to the present is

relatively small—probably 1,500 to 2,000 at most. Although this may represent the major portion of guerrillas recently indoctrinated and trained for operations in Laos, the Communists probably have considerable additional potential strength. Although we have no conclusive evidence of participation by North Vietnamese, we believe it is almost certain some are involved in the guerrilla activity, particularly in coordination, communication, and advisory roles. Lao rebel capabilities are directly proportional to the amount of assistance provided them by North Vietnam.

17. We believe that if, under existing conditions, the Communists made a vigorous effort through guerrilla warfare to seize Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces, they could succeed in doing so with an augmentation of present guerrilla forces by additional guerrilla forces and logistic support from outside Laos, and without involving the use of regular North Vietnamese units. Sam Neua town itself, which has special political and psychological importance for the Laotian Government, might be able to hold out for a considerable length of time, particularly if loyal troops elsewhere in the province conducted effective guerrilla action against the Communist guerrillas. However, problems of logistic support and morale, if not corrected, could lead to the fall or surrender of Sam Neua town. Although the loss of the two provinces and particularly of Sam Neua town would be a serious blow to the Laotian Government, we do not believe that it would lead to the collapse of the government's will to continue the struggle, particularly if it appeared that effective help would be forthcoming.

18. The considerations discussed in the paragraphs above probably caused the Communists to believe: (a) that guerrilla warfare offered some prospects—at low risk—of promoting Communist objectives in Laos even if the Lao Government received substantial moral and material support from the outside, and (b) that military forces which the West would be likely to commit inside Laos would be indecisive against the flexible Communist guerrilla tactics.

III. REACTIONS TO CERTAIN CONTINGENT DEVELOPMENTS

19. We do not believe that the Communists will resort in the near future to large-scale guerrilla activity, such as an attempt to take Sam Neua, at least so long as the UN fact-finding mission is present in Laos. The Communists will make special efforts to conceal evidences of outside participation and will probably reaffirm offers to negotiate political differences with the Laotian Government. Moreover, the US has already set in motion certain military preparedness measures in the Far East. It is possible that these or similar moves might cause the Communists to keep guerrilla activity in Laos at a low level for a considerable period.

20. If, however, Communist armed action increased in scale and effectiveness, either in the near future or at some later time, and if Laotian appeals for outside assistance did not result in quick and favorable response, it is probable that Laotian morale would rapidly decline and the will to resist would wither away. Such developments would have widespread adverse repercussions throughout neutral and non-Communist elements in Southeast Asia.

21. Hanoi and Peiping have warned that any foreign military intervention in Laos would be considered as a direct threat to their national security. However, depending partly on the scale and nature of the military move, the Communist military reaction to the Western intervention, whether under UN, SEATO, or US auspices, initially would probably take the form of further covert North Vietnamese intervention rather than overt invasion. There probably would be less effort than at present to camouflage this intervention. This Communist action might, in the first instance, be limited to seizing substantial territory in Laos—such as Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces—which we believe they could do under existing conditions with an augmentation of present guerrilla forces, and then using this situation for political bargaining purposes. The Communists would probably be prepared to accept a prolonged and unresolved

struggle, particularly if the country were geographically divided. If non-Asian forces were committed in Laos, the likelihood of an overt Communist invasion would increase.[4]

22. If the Communists should come to believe that a Western intervention appeared capable of resolving the conflict and establishing firm anti-Communist control over Laos, they would then face the difficult decision of whether to raise the ante further, possibly to the point of openly committing North Vietnamese or Chinese Communist forces to the fighting. We estimate that both Communist China and the USSR wish to avoid serious risk of expanding the hostilities more broadly in the Far East or beyond. We believe, therefore, that the Communists would seek through various uses of diplomacy, propaganda, covert action and guerrilla warfare to cause the West to back down. If, however, the Communists became convinced during the course of a series of actions and counteractions that the US intended to commit major US combat forces into Laos, we believe that the odds would be better than even that the Communists would directly intervene in strength with North Vietnamese and possibly Chinese Communist military forces.[5]

23. The Communists would probably counter the unilateral introduction of "volunteers" or regular military units from South Vietnam and Thailand with the introduction of North Vietnamese "volunteers."

24. The uncommitted and anti-Communist countries of the world would view with alarm a Communist takeover of Laos, but are fearful that a Western intervention in Laos might lead to the outbreak of a major war. Nevertheless, most of these countries, including most members of SEATO, would probably support such intervention if they were convinced of the gravity of the Laotian Government's position and of direct Communist Bloc support of the rebels in Laos. The findings of the UN Security Council subcommittee will almost certainly have an important influence in this respect.

25. If the uncommitted and anti-Communist countries accepted the need for intervention in Laos, they would prefer that such action be taken under UN auspices. If dispatch of a UN-led force were blocked by Communist diplomatic opposition, intervention by SEATO would probably be supported by most Free World countries despite the strong dislike of some neutralist nations for the SEATO concept. On the other hand, SEATO failure to move effectively in response to a Lao appeal for help would not only endanger the existence of SEATO itself but would seriously weaken the confidence of the non-SEATO states of Asia in the West's determination and ability to defend them from Communist attack.

26. US military intervention, such as the dispatch of troops to Laos, in the absence of broad acceptance of the need to intervene would probably have little support even among the anti-Communist nations. Our SEATO allies, however, would probably support us although most might do so with considerable reluctance.

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[4] See footnote to Conclusion 5.

[5] See footnotes to Conclusion 6.